

Raised House Bill, Number #5485, An Act concerning the Office of the Victim Advocate

Judiciary Committee

March 19, 2010

Good Morning Senator MacDonald, Representative Lawlor and distinguished members of the Judiciary Committee. My name is Mary Colleen Hiller and I live in Wallingford, Connecticut. I thank you for the opportunity to speak in opposition to Raised House Bill # 5485

I became the victim of domestic violence and attempted sexual assault of a spouse on August 18, 2008 and a protective order was issued to protect me from my husband, my accused attacker. Despite having a protective order issued against him, my husband continued to contact me to discuss our finances. Although I asked the judge in my husbands' criminal case to modify the protective order to allow contact solely for the purposes of discussing our finances in relation to our pending divorce, the judge denied my request. However the judge did make an exception providing for contact through a mediator which ultimately I could not afford. This left me in an untenable position since the no contact order was at odds with the pressure I felt to manage the finances. Subsequently I was arrested in February 2009 and charged with four felony counts of conspiring to violate that protective order. I was turned into the police by my husband and his attorney. I have no doubt that in my abusers' mind, to level the playing field in his criminal case, he tried to use this against me. Suddenly I found myself both a victim and a defendant at the same time. I had no idea where to turn for help. I called the victims advocates at the courthouse but was relatively unsuccessful in securing help. I finally turned to the Susan B. Anthony project, an agency that provides guidance and support to victims of domestic violence in Torrington, C.T. They suggested I contact the OVA. The OVA immediately responded with the support, advocacy and legal advice as to my state constitutional rights as a crime victim, which I clearly needed. In addition to advocating for my rights as a victim of domestic violence, the OVA identified a systemic issue predominantly in my area of the state with charging victims with conspiracy to violate their own protective orders. It took almost a year but in January 2010 all charges against me for the protective order violations were dismissed. I believe this is due to the work of the OVA in tackling this systemic issue with individuals and entities within the criminal justice system.

The OVAs' commitment to victims' rights is unsurpassed, but it is more than that. People such as me who find themselves entangled in the legal system become easily overwhelmed, confused and frightened. As an abused person, you feel entitled to nothing, especially when it comes to advocating for yourself. Add to that facing four felony charges and you feel as though your world has ended. The OVA was committed to educating, guiding and supporting me. I felt from the moment I met the OVA representatives that they were there to fight for my rights as a victim. I believe it is their status as an independent agency that allowed them to advocate for me and that is why I feel so strongly that that is the way they should remain.

Mary Colleen Hiller